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ABSTRACT

The role of the syllabus in second language teaching is described, distinguishing six major types of syllabi and how they might be implemented in various teaching situations. The foreign language teaching syllabus involves both the integration of subject matter (what to talk about) and linguistic matter (how to talk about it). Choices of syllabi can range from the purely linguistic (the teaching of grammar and vocabulary) to the semantic or information type (the teaching of a particular skill). To design a syllabus is to decide what gets taught and in what order; therefore, the choice of a syllabus is a major decision and should be made with as much information as possible. Although six distinct types of language teaching syllabi exist, they are not mutually exclusive, for almost all syllabi are combinations of two or more of the following types: (1) a structural formal syllabus (teaching of grammar); (2) a notional/functional syllabus (teaching of functions that are performed when language is used or the notions that language is used to express); (3) a situational syllabus (teaching language in a context of real or imaginary situations in which language is used); (4) a skill-based syllabus (teaching specific language skills-listening, reading, and so on); (5) a task-based syllabus (teaching a variety of language forms, functions, and skills so students may complete a piece of work); and (6) a content-based syllabus (teaching course content, like science, using the language that the students are also learning). Ten steps in preparing a practical language teaching syllabus are included. (TR)

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ERIC Digest

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This Digest is based on the ERIC/CLL *Language in Education* series monograph entitled *Approaches to Syllabus Design for Foreign Language Teaching* by Karl Krahnke, available from Prentice-Hall/Regents for \$11.33. To order, write to: Book Distribution Center, Route 59 at Brook Hill Dr., West Nyack, NY 10994 or call: 1-800-223-1360.

The Place of the Syllabus

A language teaching syllabus involves the integration of subject matter (*what* to talk about) and linguistic matter (*how* to talk about it); that is, the actual matter that makes up teaching. Choices of syllabi can range from the more or less purely linguistic, where the content of instruction is the grammatical and lexical forms of the language, to the purely semantic or informational, where the content of instruction is some skill or information and only incidentally the form of the language. To design a syllabus is to decide what gets taught and in what order. For this reason, the theory of language explicitly or implicitly underlying the language teaching method will play a major role in determining what syllabus is adopted. Theory of learning also plays an important part in determining the kind of syllabus used. For example, a syllabus based on the theory of learning espoused by cognitive code teaching would emphasize language forms and whatever explicit descriptive knowledge about those forms was presently available. A syllabus based on an acquisition theory of learning, however, would emphasize unanalyzed, though possibly carefully selected experiences of the new language in an appropriate variety of discourse types.

The choice of a syllabus is a major decision in language teaching, and it should be made as consciously and with as much information as possible. There has been much confusion over the years as to what different types of content are possible in language teaching syllabi and as to whether the differences are in syllabus or method. Several distinct types of language teaching syllabi exist, and these different types may be implemented in various teaching situations.

Six Types of Syllabi

Although six different types of language teaching syllabi are treated here as though each occurred "purely," in practice, these types rarely occur independently of each other. Almost all actual language teaching syllabi are combinations of two or more of the types defined here. For a given course, one type of syllabus usually dominates, while other types of content may be combined with it. Furthermore, the six types of syllabi are not entirely distinct from each other. For example, the distinction between skill-based and task-based syllabi may be minimal. In such cases, the distinguishing factor is often the way in which the instructional content is used in the actual teaching procedure. The characteristics, differences, strengths, and weaknesses of individual syllabi are defined as follows:

1. A *structural (formal) syllabus*. The content of language teaching is a collection of the forms and structures, usually grammatical, of the language being taught. Examples include nouns, verbs, adjectives, statements, questions, subordinate clauses, and so on.

2. A *notional/functional syllabus*. The content of the language teaching is a collection of the functions that are performed when language is used, or of the notions that language is used to express. Examples of functions include: informing, agreeing, apologizing, requesting; examples of notions include size, age, color, comparison, time, and so on.

3. A *situational syllabus*. The content of language teaching is a collection of real or imaginary situations in which language occurs or is used. A situation usually involves several participants who are engaged in some activity in a specific setting. The language occurring in the situation involves a number of functions, combined into a plausible segment of discourse. The primary purpose of a situational language teaching syllabus is to teach the language that occurs in the situations. Examples of situations include: seeing the dentist, complaining to the landlord, buying a book at the book store, meeting a new student, and so on.

4. A *skill-based syllabus*. The content of the language teaching is a collection of specific abilities that may play a part in using language. Skills are things that people must be able to do to be competent in a language, relatively independently of the situation or setting in which the language use can occur. While situational syllabi group functions together into specific settings of language use, skill-based syllabi group linguistic competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse) together into generalized types of behavior, such as listening to spoken language for the main idea, writing well-formed paragraphs, giving effective oral presentations, and so on. The primary purpose of skill-based instruction is to learn the specific language skill. A possible secondary purpose is to develop more general competence in the language, learning only incidentally any information that may be available while applying the language skills.

5. A *task-based syllabus*. The content of the teaching is a series of complex and purposeful tasks that the students want or need to perform with the language they are learning. The tasks are defined as activities with a purpose other than language learning, but, as in a content-based syllabus, the performance of the tasks is approached in a way that is

intended to develop second language ability. Language learning is subordinate to task performance, and language teaching occurs only as the need arises during the performance of a given task. Tasks integrate language (and other) skills in specific settings of language use. Task-based teaching differs from situation-based teaching in that while situational teaching has the goal of teaching the specific language content that occurs in the situation (a predefined *product*), task-based teaching has the goal of teaching students to draw on resources to complete some piece of work (a *process*). The students draw on a variety of language forms, functions, and skills, often in an individual and unpredictable way, in completing the tasks. Tasks that can be used for language learning are, generally, tasks that the learners actually have to perform in any case. Examples include: applying for a job, talking with a social worker, getting housing information over the telephone, and so on.

6. A *content-based syllabus*. The primary purpose of instruction is to teach some content or information using the language that the students are also learning. The students are simultaneously language students and students of whatever content is being taught. The subject matter is primary, and language learning occurs incidentally to the content learning. The content teaching is not organized around the language teaching, but vice-versa. Content-based language teaching is concerned with information, while task-based language teaching is concerned with communicative and cognitive processes. An example of content-based language teaching is a science class taught in the language the students need or want to learn, possibly with linguistic adjustment to make the science more comprehensible.

In general, the six types of syllabi or instructional content are presented beginning with the one based most on structure, and ending with the one based most on language use. Language is a relationship between form and meaning, and most instruction emphasizes one or the other side of this relationship.

Choosing and Integrating Syllabi

Although the six types of syllabus content are defined here in isolated contexts, it is rare for one type of syllabus or content to be used exclusively in actual teaching settings. Syllabi or content types are usually combined in more or less integrated ways, with one type as the organizing basis around which the others are arranged and related. In discussing syllabus choice and design, it should be kept in mind that the issue is not which *type* to choose but which *types*, and how to relate them to each other.

Practical Guidelines to Syllabus Choice and Design

It is clear that no single type of content is appropriate for all teaching settings, and the needs and conditions of each setting are so idiosyncratic that specific recommendations for combination are not possible. In addition, the process of designing and implementing an actual syllabus warrants a separate volume. Several books are available that address the process of syllabus design and implementation both practically and theoretically (see *For Further Reading* section; the full-length monograph includes a 13-item annotated bibliography of basic works on syllabus design and a 67-item reference list). These books can help language course designers make decisions for their own programs. However, a set of guidelines for the process is provided below.

Ten steps in preparing a practical language teaching syllabus:

1. Determine, to the extent possible, what outcomes are desired for the students in the instructional program. That is, as exactly and realistically as possible, define what the students should be able to do as a result of the instruction.
2. Rank the syllabus types presented here as to their likelihood of leading to the outcomes desired. Several rankings may be necessary if outcomes are complex.
3. Evaluate available resources in expertise (for teaching, needs analysis, materials choice and production, etc.), in materials, and in training for teachers.
4. Rank the syllabi relative to available resources. That is, determine what syllabus types would be the easiest to implement given available resources.
5. Compare the lists made under Nos. 2 and 4. Making as few adjustments to the earlier list as possible, produce a new ranking based on the resources' constraints.
6. Repeat the process, taking into account the constraints contributed by teacher and student factors described earlier.
7. Determine a final ranking, taking into account all the information produced by the earlier steps.
8. Designate one or two syllabus types as dominant and one or two as secondary.
9. Review the question of combination or integration of syllabus types and determine how combinations will be achieved and in what proportion.
10. Translate decisions into actual teaching units.

In making practical decisions about syllabus design, one must take into consideration all the possible factors that might affect the teachability of a particular syllabus. By starting with an examination of each syllabus type, tailoring the choice and integration of the different types according to local needs, one may find a principled and practical solution to the problem of appropriateness and effectiveness in syllabus design.

For Further Reading

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- Mohan, B. (1979). Relating language teaching and content teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 13(2), 171-82.
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About the Monograph

Approaches to Syllabus Design for Foreign Language Teaching, by Karl Krahnke, includes chapters on the place of the syllabus in language teaching, six types of language teaching syllabi, and choosing and integrating syllabi, as well as individual chapters devoted to each of the six types of syllabi defined here. The author is Associate Professor of English and Director of ESL Teacher Training at Colorado State University.